National Alliance for Nutrition and Activity

Obesity and Other Diet-Related Diseases in Children

Obesity and Other Diet-Related Diseases Are Leading Causes of Death in the United States. Heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes are responsible for two-thirds of deaths in the United States.[1] Major risk factors for those diseases often are established in childhood: unhealthy eating habits, physical inactivity, and obesity.

Childhood Obesity Is Skyrocketing. Over the last two decades, rates of obesity have doubled in children and tripled in adolescents.[2] One in seven young people is obese and one in three is overweight. Obese 10-14 year olds are 28 times more likely than non-obese children to be obese in young adulthood.[3] On health-related quality of life tests (measuring physical, psychosocial, emotional, social, and school functioning quality of life), obese children between the ages of 5 to 18 years score significantly lower than healthy children, with scores similar to those of children diagnosed with cancer.[4]

Children Are Eating More Calories. U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) surveys have found that children ages 2 to 18 years consumed an average of 118 more calories per day in 1996 than they did in 1978.[5] An extra 118 calories per day, if not compensated for through increased physical activity, translates into an average of 12 pounds of weight gain per year.

Overall, Few Children Are Eating Healthy Diets. Only 2% of children (2 to 19 years) meet the USDA's five main recommendations for a healthy diet.[6] Three out of four children consume more saturated fat than is recommended in the *Dietary Guidelines for Americans.*[7] Three out of four American high school students do not eat even five servings of fruits and vegetables each day.[8] Many children are both overweight and undernourished.

Poor Diet and Obesity Are Causing "Adult" Diseases in Children. One-quarter of children ages five to 10 years show early warning signs for heart disease, such as elevated blood cholesterol or high blood pressure.[9] Atherosclerosis (clogged arteries) begins in childhood. Autopsy studies of 15 to 19 year olds have found that all have fatty streaks in more than one artery, and about 10% have advanced fibrous plaques.[10]

Type 2 diabetes can no longer be called "adult onset" diabetes because of rising rates in children. In one study, the incidence of type 2 diabetes in adolescents increased ten-fold between 1982 and 1994.[11] For individuals born in 2000, the chance of developing diabetes during their lifetime is 39% for females and 33% for males.[12]

Empty Calories and Obesity. While obesity is a complex, multi-factorial problem, soft drinks and snack foods play a key role. Children who consume more soft drinks consume more calories (about 55 to 190 per day) than kids who drink fewer soft drinks[13,14] and are more likely to become overweight.[15] Sodas and fruit drinks are the biggest single source of calories and added sugars in the diets of teenagers.[16] Increases in children's calorie intake during the 1990's were driven by increased intakes of foods and beverages high in added sugars.[17]

A study conducted by the Harvard School of Public Health found that for each additional serving of soda or juice drink a child consumes per day, the child's chance of becoming overweight increases by 60%.[18] A health-education program encouraging elementary school students to decrease soft drink consumption reduced rates of overweight and obesity.[19]

Consumption of soft drinks can displace healthier foods from children's diets, like low-fat milk, which can help prevent osteoporosis.[16,17,20,21,22] The number of calories children consume from snacks increased by 120 calories per day between 1977 and 1996, from 363 calories to 484 calories.[23]

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